

## Who By Fire

Shanah tovah, I hope everyone is having an easy fast, and wish you a g'mar chaitimah tovah, that you have already been sealed for good in the Book of Life. I spoke recently to the kids in my class at the Simcha Learning Center at the Rabbi Stephen and Karen Franklin Religious School about the High Holy Days, and particularly about our prayers. What is the difference, I asked them, between a High Holy Day service, and a regular Shabbat service?

Even if you come to Shabbat services every week, it is a bit of a tough question. First of all, even though you come to services, it doesn't mean you know what the prayers are, their order, and what they all mean. Secondly, we only go to High Holy Day services two or three times a year, so it is hard to make a comparison. One student had a good answer: "The shofar?" he said. Yes, the shofar, which is blown on Rosh Hashanah many times, and once at the end of Yom Kippur, is one difference.

Another difference is the *vidui*, or the confessions. We have both long and short confessions on the High Holy Day service. "*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu...*" We are guilty, we have been violent, we have stolen..., the short confession, and the longer '*Al Chet.*' "*Al chet s'chatanu lifanecha...*" "The sin we have sinned against you under duress and by choice, the sin we have sinned against you consciously and unconsciously...."

Another difference on the High Holy Days is a stress on Gd as ruler, as king. Many of our usual blessings end describing Gd, as in, "Baruch Ata... **EI** hakadosh," "Blessed are You, the holy **Gd**." On the High Holy Days the same blessing has a different ending, "Baruch Ata... **haMelech** hakadosh," "Blessed are You...the holy **King**."

One difference that one of the students remembered was "Avinu Malkeinu," "Our Father, Our King," which is a poem that is added to services only on the High Holy Days. In fact, there are many poems that are added to the services on holidays. These are called *piyutim*, singular *piyut*, and there are specific ones that are added for specific holidays. One of the big differences between Orthodox and Reform services is that we have removed many of the *piyutim* from our prayerbooks. There are some that we did keep, like Adon Olam for Shabbat, or Avinu Malkeinu for the High Holy Days.

One *piyut* that comes right to the heart of the meaning of the Days of Awe is Unetane Tokef. This is a *piyut* that is inserted into the Amidah on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is why we have to stand for so long. The High Holy Day prayerbook that

we used until last year included a little story of the origin of this poem.

According to the legend, Rabbi Amnon of Mainz was a friend of the Bishop of Mainz. One day, when the bishop asked Rabbi Amnon whether he would finally convert to Christianity, Rabbi Amnon asked for three days to think about it. The bishop had asked many times before, but Rabbi Amnon had never given this answer before. Three days later, he went to the bishop and told him that he should not have made it seem as if he was considering conversion, and that the bishop might go ahead and cut out his tongue for suggesting it.

The bishop replied that the tongue was correct, but the legs that did not come were to blame, and the arms that would not accept the cross were to blame, and so he ordered those to be cut off. Rabbi Amnon asked that his body be carried to the synagogue, and there, bleeding to death, he composed the words of Unetane Tokef.

An amazing story, although almost certainly not true. First of all, outside of this story, no one has ever heard of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. Secondly, it is a pretty good composition for someone lying on the floor bleeding to death. Third, the story goes on to say that the reason why we actually have all the words is that, after he died, Rabbi Amnon appeared to someone in a dream, and taught him the poem so he could write it down when he woke up. Fourth, it seems that elements of the poem were around earlier than the time the story was supposed to have taken place. You can draw your own conclusions.

Nonetheless, the poem stands on its own, without the story. “Let us proclaim the power of this day. It is awesome and full of dread.” The poem tells us about the Book of Life, a symbol of the High Holy Days we see throughout the *Yamim Noraim*. If we have been good, we are written in the book for a good year. If we have been bad, we are written for a bad year. If we are somewhere in the middle, we may be written in, but the decree is not sealed, and therefore, not final until Yom Kippur ends. Hence, until Rosh Hashanah is over we greet each other “Shanah Tovah tikoteivu,” may you be written for a good year, and after Rosh Hashanah “G’mar chatimah tovah,” may you already be sealed for good. Once the decree is sealed, it is final.

This is based on the Talmud, which states, “Rabbi Kruspedai said that Rabbi Yochanan said: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: One of the wholly wicked, one of the wholly righteous, and one of [people] in the middle. The wholly righteous are immediately written and sealed for life; the wholly wicked are immediately written and sealed for death; those in the middle are left suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom

Kippur. [If] they merit [it], they are written for life; [if] they do not merit [it], they are written for death.”<sup>1</sup>

We see now the connection to the story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. He set off for a visit to his friend, the bishop, with no idea that he would be tortured and killed. The poem indeed wonders, “who shall live and who shall die, who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled, who by fire, and who by water.” Gd will decide, the *piyut* tells us, based on our behavior. And Gd decrees a terrible death for Rabbi Amnon, because of his sin of seeming to consider repudiating Judaism. Rabbi Amnon is lying there thinking that you never know when or how your punishment will come, but surely it will come, for Gd is the true Judge.

This is the theme of the Days of Awe. We are here today to be judged, and if we have not been completely righteous, we will be punished for it. Because we know our own failings, we spend the day seeking atonement, fasting, praying, begging Gd to be merciful and renounce the punishment we know we deserve!

Except we know that is total hogwash. We may have done wrong-- we have done wrong-- and we may seek atonement from Gd and our fellow human beings, but are we going to die because we have not been as good as we should have been? Think also of friends and family we have lost. Must we say that Gd took them from us because of their sins? Must we say that Gd is just?

I had a congregant in Baton Rouge whose husband died before his time. She would get up and leave the sanctuary before Unetane Tokef, because she didn't want to hear it. She couldn't stand it. The idea that Gd was up in heaven with a list of sinners deciding who would die by fire and who by water, and then came to Harvey Hoffman, of blessed memory, and said “Cancer for you!” She couldn't take that concept of Gd, and neither can I.

Some may not be moved by this *piyut* because, after all, who these days dies by the sword, or by being attacked by a wild animal, or by stoning? Not impossible, but it is rare. Leonard Cohen, עליו השלום, the poet and musician, wrote a song called “Who by Fire,” which is based on Unetane Tokef. Cohen forces us to confront the poem by removing the stoning and the wild beasts, and putting in some of the things that do take us, and our friends and families, every day. Who by accident? asks Cohen. Who by over-

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1. BT Rosh Hashanah 16b

dose? Who by suicide? That hits home. We tremble in fear when we hear this song. It is frightening. It is depressing. One of Cohen's lines is "Who by slow decay?" If none of the others get you, that one will.

And after all of these questions, who by this, who by that, Cohen ends each verse with the question, "And who shall I say is calling?" And that is the question. Who is this Gd, asks Cohen, to punish us with death? Who is this message from, of life and death, and explain again to me how to be written in the book for good. In Cohen's own words, it was that ending which lifted the song up for him and turned it into a prayer. "Who is it or what is it that determines who will live and who will die? What is the source of this great furnace of creation? Who lights it? Who extinguishes it?"<sup>2</sup>

In a way, Cohen is throwing the question back at Gd. How dare You? What gives You the right to write us in the book for evil? Who did You say You were again?

The traditional answer is the one we repeat over and over in our High Holy Day liturgy, not least in the Unetane Tokef. We are deserving of punishment. We are not so stiff necked as to say before Gd 'We have not sinned.' Rather, we have sinned. We have transgressed. And all of us deserve punishment. But Repentance, Prayer, and Charity, *T'shuvah*, *t'fillah*, and *tzedakah*, will soften the harsh decree. We must confess our sins, commit to being beter people, and perhaps Gd will forgive us. What we seek today is pardon, forgiveness, atonement.

But that is the traditional answer, and we may not like it. We may not accept it. We may say with Leonard Cohen, who did you say was calling? Because if you want to call to tell me that I am going to die in some interesting way because of my sins, I will hang up on you. And I will block that number.

Unetane Tokef is a beautiful and frightening poem, and it tries to scare us into being better people. Yom Kippur tells us that we only have a little more time to do *t'shuvah*, to open our hearts, to confront our misdeeds, to commit to being good. And that is true. We don't know how long we have to make things right. We don't know how it will happen when it happens. It will not happen because of our sins, Gd forbid. But it will happen. And if we have not done *t'shuvah* by then, it will be too late. And if we have not done *t'filah* by then, it will be too late. And if we have not given *tzedakah* by then, it will be too late.

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2. Quote from 1979, <https://genius.com/12811588>

And even if we do not accept the idea that Gd will strike us down because of our wicked deeds, it is true that what we do makes a difference. That what we do counts. It may not be written in a big book, but every kind word makes the world better. Every righteous deed brings the world a little closer to perfection. Every generous action brings us one step closer to the Messianic Age.

Another way of saying that is to say that Gd cares what we do. And another way of saying that is to say that Gd judges us for each of our actions, Gd checks each of us one by one like a shepherd with His flock.

And so that is the meaning, of both Unetane Tokef and the High Holy Days: Every righteous deed matters. Every unrighteous deed makes a difference. And we only have a certain amount of time, no one know how much, to decide what to do, and to decide what kind of person to be.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will come into this world and how many will leave it? I don't know. Who will live and who will die? I don't know. Who by fire and who by water? I don't know. But I know this: each of us is called upon this day to be a better person. Before it is too late, before the fire or the water, before the accident or the avalanche, even before the sunset brings an end to this holy day, you have the freedom to choose what kind of person you will be.

Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day, this day of turning, this day of atonement. On this day we say yes, the power is in our hands, for good or for ill. We will do the best we can. And then go ahead and judge us. We will not decide how our end will come. But we will decide what we will do every moment from this day to that day.

Shanah Tovah.